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ABSTRACT

Teaching history using children's literature, both fiction and non-fiction, is an old idea enjoying new vitality in the elementary and middle school curriculum. This digest discusses: (1) the revival of interest in teaching history through children's literature; (2) research-based guidelines for teachers of history and children's literature, and (3) an innovative method of teaching history using children's literature. Teachers can enhance children's historical understanding by using instructional strategies that place a particular event or time period within the context of a broader framework of time. The history fair, a seven-week unit created by a fifth-grade teacher to teach research skills, illustrates the connection between historical fiction and nonfiction and challenges students to demonstrate their learning in a public forum as they become experts on topics that interest them. (Contains 11 references.) (JH)

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by

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Learning History Through Children's Literature

By Lynn R. Nelson and Trudy A. Nelson

Teaching history using children's literature, both fiction and non-fiction, is an old idea enjoying new vitality in the elementary and middle school curriculum. This Digest discusses (1) the revival of interest in teaching history through children's literature, (2) research-based guidelines for teachers of history and children's literature, and (3) an innovative method of teaching history using children's literature.

Revival of Interest in Teaching History Through Children's Literature. Using literature to teach history is not a recent educational innovation. Stories illustrating the triumphs of individuals embodying civic virtue and good character were at the curricular core of nineteenth-century common schools. Narratives provided children with an understanding of American history and government as well as the attributes that individual citizens needed to maintain the Republic. Spelling and reading books were primary means of this kind of cultural transmission. Generations of American children defined themselves individually and communally through stories and amalgams of fiction and fact in the McGuffy readers and similar textbooks used almost universally in schools during the last century.

An indicator of increasing interest among educators in using literature to teach history is the large number of scholarly and popular articles published in the past ten years advocating this teaching method. A number of factors account for this resurgence, such as the high quality and number of fiction and non-fiction publications written for children in the past twenty years; activities of prominent historians and educators to re-establish history's primacy in the social studies curriculum; advocacy of the whole language teaching method; concern that children have an inadequate historical understanding of the cultural characteristics that hold the Republic together; recognition that many students need to develop tolerance of individuals unlike themselves; and attention to the long-standing problems of students' lack of interest in basic school subjects (Epstein 1993; Krey 1998).

Research-based Guidelines for Teachers of History and Children's Literature in the Elementary School. The research on teaching history with literature is much more abundant than it was a decade ago (Levstik & Barton 1997). Researchers have documented the appropriateness of teaching history in elementary and middle school, and their conclusions suggest that certain elements are integral to effective instruction in history and literature (Downey & Levstik 1991; Levstik & Barton 1997; Levstik & Pappas 1990).

For instance, one of the most-repeated claims of history-education advocates is that historical narrative is more interesting and comprehensible to students than the expository writing of social studies textbooks. Levstik (1986), VanSledright (1995), and VanSledright & Kelly (1996) conducted naturalistic studies of elementary school students as they studied history through the use of multiple texts, including children's trade books. These researchers concluded that students' interest in the subject matter and their ability to learn and retain information increased significantly when their history instruction included literature. Moreover, VanSledright & Kelley (1996) reported that, given a choice, students in the fifth-grade classroom they observed were more likely to read works of fiction and non-fiction than standard textbooks.

It is also important to note that without teacher mediation to direct their reading of multiple sources of information, students failed to understand the nature of historical sources and historical writing. They tended to mistakenly judge the quality of information in a text by the text's length (VanSledright & Kelly 1996). Furthermore, without guidance from the teacher, students were unlikely to discern the relative quality or value of different sources of information. Rather, they tended to view various sources indiscriminately, as if they all were equally useful, reliable, and valid. Fifth grade students are capable of deep historical understanding, but only if carefully guided by a teacher (Levstik 1986).

Teachers can enhance children's historical understanding by using instructional strategies that place a particular event or time period within the context of a broader framework of time. Levstik & Pappas (1990) concluded that the context in which an historical event is presented and discussed may be crucial in determining whether or not children become engaged in the study of history. VanSledright & Brophy (1995) concurred that students' learning of history is greatly enhanced when teachers help them to connect events within the contexts of particular times and places. While mathematical and scientific phenomena have concrete referents in one's world experiences, historical events become meaningful only through temporal and spatial links to other events. Effective teachers, therefore, enable their students to better understand particular historical events within a contextual framework of other interrelated events.

The History Fair: An Innovative Method of Teaching History Using Children's Literature. A teaching method which involves children's literature and is consistent with research findings on the history education of elementary school students is the "history fair." A seven-week unit created by a fifth-grade teacher to teach research skills, the history fair illustrates the connection between historical fiction and non-fiction and challenges students to demonstrate their learning in

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a public forum as they become experts on topics that interest them (Nelson & Nelson 1994).

To develop student expertise, the teacher emphasizes historical fiction throughout the school year. Books which the teacher can discuss with students to stimulate their interest are available in the classroom. The class reads aloud historical fiction such as *Jayhawker* by Patricia Beatty and *My Brother Sam is Dead* by the Colliers. As the year proceeds, children present book talks and offer recommendations about the quality of the literature. This general approach to teaching history through children's literature establishes a classroom context within which to conduct the seven-week unit on the history fair.

At the beginning of the history fair unit, children choose historical fiction books that interest them. A time line is placed on the wall. As the children study history through literature, they add events and dates to the time line to gain perspective on the relationships between those events. The children read books during the first two weeks of the unit and then write reports on what they learn about a particular period in history.

During the next three weeks of the history fair, students research an event or time period treated in the historical fiction books they have chosen. Children then gather materials to find pertinent information about the time periods they are studying. Nonfiction books, *Cobblestone Magazine*, and the Internet are possible sources, but there must be a balance between types of sources used. Students are also encouraged to interview people who may have lived during the time period, if it is recent enough; for example, the Vietnam War, World War II, or the Great Depression. When they finish their research, students meet with the teacher. This critically important component of the unit allows the teacher to help students comprehend main ideas, remedy misconceptions, and offer suggestions about additional information they need to finish their inquiries. After their conferences with the teacher, students write final drafts of their research reports. During the final two weeks of the unit, students refine their reports and prepare displays.

Prior to the fair, students present their projects to classmates using their displays as guides. On the day of the history fair, the children's projects are arranged on tables in chronological order according to the time period pertaining to each project. Students and teachers view the fair during the day; parents and other family members visit in the evening. Using their displays as guides, the children talk about what they have learned.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the history fair is that children of all levels of ability can succeed and learn something important to them about a topic in history. They learn how to find information through many different sources, and they learn that when reading historical fiction, they can go beyond the story and dig deeper into the history behind that story.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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